

West

Is there a democracy of
Studies

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IS THERE A DEMOCRACY OF STUDIES

BY

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IS THERE A DEMOCRACY OF STUDIES?

I.

THE present is a time so full of busy endeavor in all parts of the secondary education that many hopeful observers of our schools are coming to think we are at the entrance, if not already in the midst of a great Age of Experiment. The centre of interest, definitely located ten or fifteen years ago in problems of colleges and universities, has shifted to the next adjacent region, to the increasingly extensive domain of the secondary school. While the questions involved in both regions of discussion are largely common, each year is making it clearer that fundamentally satisfying answers are to be sought first in the schools, and that unless this is done any answers given to the college questions involved will be lame and disappointing. It is therefore quite natural that the years since 1890 have been given more and more to the imperious school questions and to their consideration mainly from the school standpoint.

Some twenty years ago the diversity in our secondary education seemed almost chaotic. What a heterogeneous lot of schools then possessed and, for that matter, still possess the field! How little working agreement existed between the parts of the country, the parts of many individual schools, or the parts of the schoolboy's life! It is not possible, short of a volume, to tell the tale of our wasteful want of plan, and of the havoc it played. It is no wonder, then,

that when deep public interest began to be shown, and the neglected problem of the secondary school came to the fore, there was plenty of material for strenuous discussion. It is no wonder, either, that when the discussion got well under way, the condition of the schools was reflected in the blind and groping character of many proposals offered and in the bewildering variety of fallacies that were aired and exploited as sound educational theory and practice. This confusion was not primarily due to the difficulty of discovering remedies, but to the difficulty of making a diagnosis. It was not so much that schools had wrong standards or low standards, as that many had nothing which would bear rational definition as any sort of a standard.

Meanwhile, a deluge of discussion has overspread the entire world of secondary education. When in the history of our land has there been anything like it? Committees in abundance, by sevens and tens and twelves and fifteens, have entered their arks and embarked on the flood, intent on saving their several households. And the end is not yet, although, as we believe, the tops of certain irremovable mountains are once more beginning to appear. Not yet are we done with the long series of committees with numerical titles, with the conferences, conventions, and associations, or with their debates and reports and resolutions that aim to discover the true state of affairs and to propose measures of relief. Then, besides these helpful

concerted attempts, there has been much amateur individual effort. Every one seems to be trying his hand. The interest is widespread, the enthusiasm undoubtedly real, and the discussion many-sided and voluminous. Take up the educational journals and see, mixed indiscriminately with better reading, how almost every possible theory has found an advocate; how fad after fad is dubbed a "system"; how each novelty finds some one ready to hail it as a discovery; how the facile adoption of untested hypotheses is regarded as constructive thinking; how one man's belief is "as good as another's," and the equal value of all printed opinion is unconsciously admitted as an axiom. Some sort of an Age of Experiment in the secondary schools is indeed upon us, and the experimenting is becoming more expert and trustworthy, although far too much of the discussion reveals characteristics of something dangerously resembling Carlyle's Age of Paper and Age of Wind.

II.

The situation is gradually growing clearer. The theories have all been aired, and without much effect. Counsel has been lightened by words with knowledge and darkened by words without knowledge. Amid all the talk, it has gradually dawned on us that a spontaneous and silent change is going on, that the voluminous discussion has not created the change and that the change has been causing the discussion. Here at last we are on the track of facts. Something has been happening of which we were only imperfectly aware; and the something that has happened and is still happening is the determining element in the situation and, if we are wise, will be the determining element in bringing the discussion to one conclusion.

The change itself has a cause, and that cause is twofold. There is, first, the long-slumbering dissatisfaction of parents and teachers with the miscellany

of loosely related studies composing so many school programmes, and the resulting loss of thoroughness and vital unity in the education of the scholars. Things would not come to a focus. Somehow, an efficient gymnastic for the mind, an orderly set of exercises conspiring to one highly useful end, was not secured. School programmes too often lacked a base on which sound construction for the whole after life might be built. The second cause awakened the first into action,—unorganized, desultory, scattered, but widely operating action. This awakening cause was the literally enormous increase in the enrollment of pupils, which has been gathering volume every year since 1890. In that year the total enrollment in our secondary schools was 297,894. In 1898 it amounted to 554,814,—an increase of eighty-six per cent in eight years, a gain about four times as rapid as the rate of increase in population, and a gain that means doubling in ten years. The area of dissatisfaction with ineffectual courses of study naturally extended rapidly, and the problem of keeping in some sort of shape the increasingly unmanageable educational interests of the pupils became more and more pressing.

Then the change began and the discussion likewise began, but the change outran the discussion. The common element in both was a strong desire for some real unity in the school education. The aspect most emphasized in the public discussion has been the coördination of studies in programmes. Evaluation of the separate constituent studies has also received much attention. But there has been far clearer agreement in reference to the former than to the latter. In respect to such matters as the length of the school course, the number of weekly periods of recitation, the length in minutes of a period, the importance of avoiding overpressure, the need of restricting every course of study to a few valuable things, the importance of making no

distinction in the way a subject is taught to scholars going on to college and to the others who go no farther than the secondary school, the definition of "constants," "national units," "norms," "intensive study," and similar terms, which probably clarify and certainly solemnize educational documents, — in short, in respect to matters which concern the form of programmes, the lines of discussion have already converged toward a tolerable unity. But in respect to determining the content by evaluation of the separate studies less progress has been made.

It seems the plainest sense to say that a formula defining the best secondary education for any boy ought to include the following factors, anyway : (1) a carefully limited number of studies of as high intrinsic excellence as he can appreciate, (2) taught amply by the best teachers procurable, and (3) finely co-ordinated in a programme having organic unity. There is no insuperable disagreement about the second and third factors. The first one, however, gives endless trouble. Many assert that the character of the study is a small matter compared with the stimulating skill of the teacher, and say it is better for a boy to pursue a poor subject under a good teacher than a good subject under a poor teacher, or at least "just as good." Such persons, however, are seldom consistent enough to go on and say the rest of their alphabet, and to admit it is better for a boy to pursue a good subject under a good teacher than a good subject under a poor teacher ; and that it is likewise better to pursue a good subject under a poor teacher than a poor subject under a poor teacher. If they are right, the kind of teaching, and not the kind of studies, is to settle what studies make a proper programme. If they are right, they can find no refuge from the conclusion that there are no indispensable school studies, so far as the substance of them is concerned. If they are right, the best attested educational experience of modern times is wrong.

When shall we ever have done with this persistent and silly fallacy of confusion ? Of course it is true that good teachers are essential to the best education of any kind, and sad indeed is the plight of a young scholar who never feels their inspiring energy. But the teacher is not the study, nor the study the teacher, and the inherent differences in values and kinds of teachers are no more marked than in values and kinds of studies. Is history, when taught by a fine teacher, a fine study ? Few things are finer, both intrinsically and in effect on the pupil. Is not history, even when poorly taught, still intrinsically as fine a study as ever, no matter how lamentably poor the effect on the pupil ? In the latter case, we can only say that the unfortunate pupil has not really been taught history ; and that this is the fault, not of history, but of the teacher. Does the most hardened ignoramus of radical differences in the worth of studies believe that such things, for instance, as the Hawaiian language, or Christian Science, or bird-stuffing, can be made into fine studies, even under the most competent teacher ? Do any or all of them contain matter of high importance for a secondary school course ? And yet, why do they not ? They are not too hard ; not so hard for beginners as algebra or Latin. If they are good for anything, a fine teacher can make them an interesting means of developing what the dialect of pedagogy calls "mental fibre," — whatever that is. But the trouble is that in their character as school studies they are not "good for anything." They are intrinsically inferior. If the subjects above mentioned seem to constitute an extreme illustration, let us take others which will be admitted, at least when taken collectively, to be entitled to a little more consideration. Why not make up a secondary programme which shall give free play to any passable subject ? Let pupils study Dutch and Polish, if they like, rather than French and German, gauging instead of

algebra, heraldry in place of history; in the meanwhile developing hand skill by typewriting and eye skill by the microscope and the observation of coins and postage stamps, and getting a sort of finishing touch in morals and religion by reading books about How to Get On in the World. There is something the matter with the things in this list. What is it? The matter is that, taken together, they are a jumble of ill-related subjects; and taken separately, not one is an important central study, while some are not school studies at all.

So we might proceed, grade by grade, from the admittedly lower toward the higher levels. What makes the difference in every such transition? The difference lies in the relative importance of the studies as subject-matter for school instruction. There is no democracy of studies, all equal. The fact that equal times are given to certain subjects, and that they may count alike in quantity for entrance to college, does not make them equal or even comparable in character. History is neither intrinsically equal or comparable to mathematics, nor mathematics to history. They are alike in being centrally important,—let us say indispensable. They may also happen to be alike in occupying the same number of hours in a school programme. But here their obvious likeness ends. Either may foolishly be supposed to have a right to be considered "equivalent" to the other, but no such doctrine of equivalence avails to make either actually replace the other and perform its functions in education. Why have not those who are advocating "recognition" of the "claims" of all reputable studies to equality of treatment managed to propose a plan by which pupils who strongly dislike any subject may be able to omit it without damage from their school course? Every year finds a crop of boys who do not want Latin, and no great trouble occurs in their cases, because there is in existence a secondary programme which omits Latin. It

is undeniably about the poorest course offered, but still it is in existence, and it is largely attended. Why not make a like arrangement for boys who rebel against mathematics? Why not, indeed? The one cogent reason is that some mathematics, whether taught by good, indifferent, or poor teachers, is believed to be indispensable by everybody who thinks about the matter. Then there is, after all, such a thing as a selection of studies of greatest intrinsic worth. There are some studies that cannot be safely omitted. It is pitiful to see how this elementary truth has been obscured in current discussions. Let us rest well assured it is the one thing needful in school programmes.

III.

The evaluation of studies is therefore the strategic question. How shall we settle it? Shall we seek to make a uniform prescribed curriculum? If our just desire for vital unity in the secondary education does not result in substantial uniformity in regard to the central studies to be selected and their coördination in prescribed programmes, what is the use of trying to improve our admittedly defective secondary school courses? Let us make sure where we are. Let us again examine ourselves on the fundamental questions. Are there or are there not any studies of most worth? If there are, is it best they should constitute the substance of school programmes? These are the real questions. The question is not whether there should be absolutely no election and an inexorably rigid curriculum, nor whether there should be only one or several programmes consisting almost solidly of prescribed studies. The question is whether any substantially uniform prescribed scheme should be constructed; and if so, out of what elements.

And yet so eminent an observer of education as President Eliot, writing in a recent number of this magazine, declares: "There are those who say that there

should be no election of studies in secondary schools, — that the school committee, or the superintendent, or the neighboring college, or a consensus of university opinion should lay down the right course of study for the secondary school, and that every child should be obliged to follow it.”¹ There may be such persons. But the question, let us repeat, is whether substantially prescribed programmes, wherein election of studies is only incidental, and not determinative, are not the best. This, and this alone, is the issue. There does not exist to-day in the United States, unless it be in the Jesuit colleges, any important body of opinion in favor of one absolutely prescribed secondary programme which “every child should be obliged to follow.” Still, President Eliot, assailing the advocates of prescribed courses of study, goes on to say: “This is precisely the method followed in Moslem countries, where the Koran prescribes the perfect education to be administered to all children alike.” He fails, however, to add that uniform programmes, consisting almost solidly of prescribed studies, are the secondary programmes of Germany and France and Great Britain and the United States, and every other enlightened modern nation. Nevertheless, in his judgment, “direct revelation from on high would be the only satisfactory basis for a uniform prescribed school curriculum. The immense deepening and expanding of human knowledge in the nineteenth century, and the increasing sense of the sanctity of the individual’s gifts and will-power, have made uniform prescriptions of study in secondary schools impossible and absurd.” The dilemma is obvious. Only “direct revelation from on high” would furnish a “satisfactory basis for a uniform prescribed school curriculum,” and without it “uniform prescriptions of study in sec-

ondary schools” are “impossible and absurd.” What then becomes of uniform prescribed programmes generally, and, inasmuch as the dilemma is so sharply placed before us, it is in order to ask, What becomes in particular of the four programmes put forth in 1893 by President Eliot as chairman of the notable Committee of Ten? — “working programmes which they recommend for trial wherever the secondary period is limited to four years.”² From five sixths to seven eighths of the several programmes offered consists of “uniform prescriptions of study,” and relatively little is left to the pupil’s option, beyond the external option as to which prescribed programme he will follow. In fact, if we omit the single choice between French and German, we omit the greater part of the internal options altogether. Here then are programmes embodying a high degree of prescribed uniformity. They are what they were meant to be, — commendable attempts to make courses consisting substantially of “uniform prescriptions of study.” No one considers them “impossible and absurd.” Whether we should consequently regard them as based on “direct revelation from on high” need not be argued here.

How clear it is we shall not succeed in framing rational plans of study unless we first know what the indispensable constituent elements are! How clear it is that this will not be done if we ignore or minimize the intrinsic worth of the separate studies! Though the public discussion in which we have been engaged has not failed to deal with this aspect of the situation, it has not yet brought the strife of studies to a pause, much less to a sufficiently definite decision. But something else is doing this, and promising to do it effectually. This something is the free movement of large numbers of pupils, aided by the common sense of

¹ Atlantic Monthly, October, 1899, page 443.

² Pages 44–47 of the Report of the Committee on Secondary School Studies appointed

at the meeting of the National Educational Association, July 9, 1892. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1893.

individual parents and teachers, toward the studies they find to be of most worth, and the courses which contain such studies in largest proportion. What else can be the meaning of the vast increase in the enrollment of pupils in Latin? Is it because the teachers are better? Then why is almost as great an increase found in history, and a comparable gain in geometry and algebra? Not only the size but the swiftness of the increase bars out fine teaching as the determining explanation. Even if it were the explanation, there are still some questions to be asked about the effect of fine studies in attracting and developing fine teachers. But we have even better practical proof that it is not the explanation. In many instances, the same teachers who were formerly trying ineffectually to interest their pupils in English grammar have of late turned to teaching Latin with success in the same schools to pupils of the same grade, and this in spite of the fact that they were teachers without previous training in teaching Latin. The explanation is that the substance of the study is found to be interesting and valuable. The same is true of a few other studies. Let us put them all in a list in answer to the question, What subjects in the last eight years are gaining in pupils faster than the eighty-six per cent which represents the increase in total enrollment for the same period? They are as follows:

Studies.	Enrollment in 1889-90.	Enrollment in 1897-98.	Percentage of increase.
Latin	100,144 . .	274,293 . .	174
History (ex- cept U.S.)	82,909 . .	209,034 . .	152
Geometry	59,781 . .	147,515 . .	147
Algebra	127,397 . .	306,755 . .	141
German	34,208 . .	78,994 . .	131
French	28,032 . .	58,165 . .	107
Greek	12,869 . .	24,904 . .	94

With the possible exception of English, there is no other study to be added.¹

¹ The figures given above are taken from an elaborate table furnished by the United States Commissioner of Education. The available statistics are not sufficient to yield a positive statement in respect to English. But it is a

It is a list of gravely important facts which cannot be gainsaid. The classics, history, mathematics, and modern languages, with nothing else — except perhaps English — are gaining swiftly, not by prescription, but by the natural preferences of parents, teachers, and pupils. The trend of things is toward these studies, and in varying degree away from the others. How easy it now becomes to frame programmes! The seven in the list, with English added, would of course be somewhat more than could be taught adequately in one programme. But not a great deal more. In fact, they really make one course of study, with very few options needed to create two or three typical programmes. If we leave out Greek, the other studies, with a substantial amount of science added, make an admirable course of the so-called "Latin-scientific" type. Take the list, adding English and omitting one modern language, and we get a fine classical course. If a third course be needed, omitting both Latin and Greek, its construction also becomes feasible. The practical advantages ensuing are very great. The several courses consist in the main of the same studies. This common substratum may be incorporated without differentiation in the several programmes, thus helping to secure the maximum results with the least waste.

Not only is the primary material of programmes thus coming together into one body, but the fortunes of certain important studies are being improved separately. And the fortunes of Latin first and most of all. It now enrolls more pupils than any other secondary study, excepting algebra and English. Almost half of all the pupils study it. It has twice as many scholars as French and German combined. It is gaining faster than any other subject, its percentage

matter of little account, because no one doubts English ought to be included, and that it is already included in some form in every secondary school.

of increase being fully twice the eighty-six per cent which measures the rate of gain in total enrollment. Greek lags far behind Latin in its enrollment and rate of gain. It is the lowest on our list of seven. Still, it is on the list of studies gaining faster than the average. And a powerful influence is at work to help the gain in Greek still more. That influence is Latin. How can Latin ever be taught in its full attractiveness without Greek? This is a question that cannot be left unanswered. Who are to answer it,—those who know Latin and Greek, or those who do not? If the answer of those who know the classics is to be given credence, we shall have little difficulty in understanding why Latin is helping Greek. Their answer is plain. It is that without Greek the demand of Latin for its full integrity cannot be met. Greek is in Latin as French is not in German, or German in French. But Latin is not in Greek. It may be taught with advantage, with great advantage, but without Greek it cannot be taught to the best advantage, because it is cut off from a large range of important illustration and support. This has been seen again and again in our schools: classes studying Greek and Latin regularly surpass classes studying Latin alone. It is therefore to be expected that though Latin without Greek will prove adequate to the wants of a majority of the scholars, it will not prove so satisfying to those who want the best Latin. When a class of beginners in Latin is differentiated, after a year of study together, who is it that add Greek to their Latin? It is usually the finer students, those who would naturally want the best Latin. And so Greek suits them not only because of its attractive excellence, but because the longer they study it, the more they come to realize how much it does to illuminate their Latin. The two are one study, after all, and the one is Greek. The

influence of the swift recent advance in Latin is therefore sure to quicken the slower pace of Greek.

In respect to the other studies no special comment is needed. Their gains are most gratifying, though not so surprising as the gain in Latin and even in Greek. They have not been compelled to hold their ground against repeated attempts to displace them, nor to make their advance in the face of attack. Their gains are the gains of long peace followed by sudden prosperity. But the gains in Latin and Greek are conquests. They have been won *flagrante bello*, and have an air of victory about them.

Thus again history repeats itself, and so plainly that all may understand. The evaluation of secondary studies is being worked out in evidently intimate connection with the classics, and this time through the agency of Latin. Though Greek is comparatively small in numbers, its influence remains significant. As of old, though small, it plays a great part. Greek is to-day the schoolmaster of studies as truly as ancient Greece was the teacher of the young Western world. It is holding Latin to true standards, thus enlightening and completing it for the better students.

“Iuvenes quibus arte benigna
Et meliore luto finxit praecordia Titan.”

Latin, especially when toned by Greek, then helps on every side, whether in our own tongue or in the other modern languages, or in its rôle as the intimate companion of history, or as an element in that well-tried twofold discipline in thought and expression, classics and mathematics. Here again the school studies, now being experimentally preferred, reveal not only their individual worth, but their kinship. Like a fine family, they display collectively that intimacy of relationship which makes them stand together as one, and which in its degree corresponds to and therefore constantly suggests the indissoluble unity of the human mind.

Andrew F. West.

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